

Photographs for The New York Times by PATRICK A. BURNS
They come to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, the old people, to sit and wait. For what? No one really knows.

Aged Wait in Stony Solitude, but Not for Buses

By McCANDLISH PHILLIPS

Two kinds of people wait in the Port Authority Bus Terminal near Times Square. Some are waiting for buses. Others are waiting for death.

At times transients cannot get a seat because so many of "the regulars" are there: Old people, from about 61 to 90 years old, who have made the waiting room a kind of club. Some come almost every day, to sit and wait, but not for buses.

Most sit alone, in silence. A few read. Some are convivial and gabby. "Once you start to talk to somebody, you have to talk to them every day," one of the quiet ones said, explaining his social reticence.

Max Cohen struts around the waiting room with four or five cigars in his jersey shirt pocket and one stuck in the side of his mouth. He is a very small, wiry man with plenty of vinegar who wears his bristly white hair cut short. He worked for 50 years as a newspaper deliverer and now often comes to the terminal twice a day.

"Why don't you go home, Max?" he was asked.

"What, to lay down and look at four walls?" he shot back. He lives in a small, sparsely furnished room that rents for \$7 a week. "Later on, I'll go out and sit in the

park, when it gets a little warmer," he said.

To old people whose dwellings are tiny or dreary or places of endless boredom, the waiting room is a kind of indoor park. It never rains in the Port Authority bus terminal. The overhead bulbs are as steady as the sun in a cloudless sky.

200 to 250 Regulars

From 200 to 250 old men and women are known to come to the terminal regularly. Many more come now and then.

Occasionally the Port Authority police come in to clear the room, but it is a futile game, the rules of which are known to both sides.

Two policemen arrived at 1:20 P.M. the other day and stood in the center of the room. One of them spoke in a loud, brassy voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen. This here area is for people with tickets only. If you have a ticket, fine. If not, please get up and leave. Now show us your tickets."

There was a shuffling exodus as the ticketless drifted out into the concourse or the public toilets. For several minutes the room was the preserve of the ticketed minority, but within six minutes things were back to normal.

At 2:04 the police came



Most sit alone in silence. A few read and some chat.

again and, immediately, three old people departed. There was no announcement this time; the blue shadow was enough.

Some old people come and go like characters in a drama, having fixed roles to play. Two are known as "the Lovers." They come in separately, meet, sit and hold hands a while, then leave.

Romeo is in his early 70's,

a tall, spare man with bony shoulders that seem like pipes under his jacket. Juliet is in her late 60's, short, round-faced.

"You would think they were 16 years old and just in love," a woman said. "She always wears a veil on her hair. He wears a little cap, a couple of sizes too small, and they sit and hold hands."

Some sitters look invincibly alone — severe, motionless, figures in stone.

It was 5:55 P.M. For two and a half hours now, a tall, elderly woman with fluffy white hair had been sitting alone, in a pink jacket and blue miniskirt, gazing straight ahead. Thin lips, painted a bright orange-red, stood out in a rougeless face powdered white.

"Never marry an old bachelor. They never change their ways," a woman in a red hat was saying to a woman named Mary. "I married an old bachelor. Selfish! Leave all kinds of pots and pans. He was terrible. I had to get rid of him."

For more than an hour, red hat ran on and Mary was held to brief expressions of assent.

"Don't forget this town is made up of all the little towns in the country," a woman nearby in sunglasses said. "It's just another little town, except it's bigger. Everybody came here from somewhere."

The watchers are watched three days a week, from noon to 4:30 P.M., by the friendly eyes of Mrs. Stella G. Trebony and Mrs. Mary Butler. The Port Authority, which regards the visitors as a mild form of nuisance, like an excess of pigeons on a veranda, has sanctioned a long-term study of the phenomenon, which began last June and looks as though it may run on for years.

Watchers for Waiters

The presence of the two watchers goes back a little over a year to the point at which the perplexity of Port Authority officials led to a call for help to Travelers Aid, which led to a plea to the New York City Office for the Aging.

Mrs. Stella B. Allen of the West Side Office for the Aging met with Marvin Weiss, the terminal manager, and five others to talk about what could be done.

"They wanted to get them out, but without being too harsh," Mrs. Allen recalled. "We decided we were not going to throw them out. That we knocked off the agenda first."

It was decided to put a table in the waiting room and to let it be tended by Mrs. Trebony and Mrs. Butler of Project Find, 1966 Broadway.

"Two chief terrors haunt the minds of older people," Mrs. Allen said. "One is placement in a home for the aged. The other is going on Welfare."

One of the regulars is a

woman who carries two bottles of wine in a shopping bag. She comes in and sips on them during the day and sometimes, when she is feeling loose, she stands up and sings "Moon River," a little bit off key.

Another steady sitter, of a bouncy, outgoing sort, speaks five languages "and he comes in and says 'good morning' in all five languages," an elderly woman said.

Some Dress Very Well

At 7:15 P.M., the woman with the white fluffy hair was still fast in her place. It had been almost four hours now.

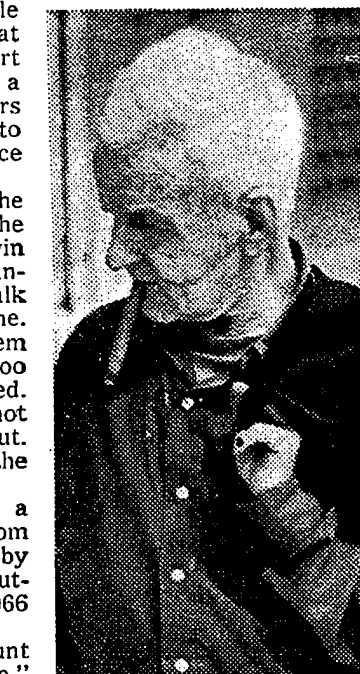
A few of the sitters seem to have stepped out of a George Price cartoon. Their attempts at elegance are irreparably gauche. Several old sitters are alcoholics. Yet a surprising number, over half, dress and behave like solid members of the middle class, the upper middle class at that.

One man cuts the figure of a diplomat. He wears striped trousers, a dark blue coat with vest and a black hat that stands out against a thick fringe of white hair. He looks as though he might have been at the Versailles conference. He sits erect, like a man posing for an oil portrait. He does not talk to strangers.

Mrs. Trebony, who still has the soft accents of her years in Savannah, Ga., offers assistance to any who need it, and will take it.

Most of the regulars are from the West Side of Manhattan.

Mrs. Trebony nodded toward a male sitter. "He's here because he and his wife sat here," she said. "He goes around to all the places where they used to go, hoping she'll come to get him. He says: 'Why do you think she never comes?' He goes every Tuesday to the grave. People say he's crazy. Now,



Max Cohen dislikes staying home looking at the walls. Later, when the weather is better, he'll go outdoors.



The terminal is an indoor park where it never rains.

you know, I don't think he's crazy. Do you?"

A woman who is 90 and beyond the joys of living said: "I really just wish I would die, Stella. I wonder when my husband will come and get me?"

"You better be careful now," Mrs. Trebony said. "Which one of them do you want to come and get you?" The nonagenarian has been married three times.

Mrs. Trebony told of an old woman who came at last to the point at which she knew she needed public assistance, a day she had hoped never to see. "She wasn't even getting enough to eat," Mrs. Trebony said. "She had spent her reserve."

The woman held out for a while more, but finally agreed to make out forms for help. "I hoped I wouldn't live this long," she said. The next morning she was dead.

Mrs. Trebony and Mrs. Butler supply half-fare subway cards to those who need them, as often as they need them.

In this city, that is not necessarily a one-time favor. Old people are often mugged, and they lose their half-fare cards with their money.

The elderly know that thieves and purse-snatchers lurk in the terminal to prey on the moving crowd, but feel fairly safe in the main waiting room where a thief cannot quickly melt into the throng.

A few months ago an 86-year-old man named August went into a hospital for seven weeks. When he came out, he had lost his rented room.

With residential hotels quoting \$14-a-day rates, or \$70-a-week, there were terrors in it for him.

Park to Lure Old Folks

Mrs. Allen, commenting on why the elderly fear being sent to a home for the aged or being put on welfare, said:

"They feel that either just cancels them out as a person. They feel that this is the end of them. That's why they struggle so hard to stay independent, 'to be free,' as they put it."

"They can live in the crummiest little hole in a third-rate hotel, with pipes on the ceiling and holes in the floor, but they'll hold onto it," said Elizabeth Stecher of Project Find. "They only need a little bit of help to stay free—just a little bit of help."

A scale model of a vest-pocket park, with thumb-high trees and tiny plastic people, that sits in the office suite in the terminal is management's vision of one thing that might be done: The Port Authority would create a park near Times Square to lure the old folks out of the waiting room. The approach is one of attrition-through-compassion.

It would not be likely to work. One of the attractions of the waiting room is shelter from bad weather.

A more likely idea is Project Find's plan to open a coffeehouse for the elderly in the area. It has already raised \$10,000 for this, and is seeking \$20,000 more.

At 8:45 P.M., the woman with the white fluffy hair wrapped her black coat around her and drowsed, her head slumping to her shoulder. A policeman walked behind her. Gently he touched her shoulder. "Mom," he said. "Mom, wake up." She brought her head up straight.

The illusion that one is waiting for a bus is made less credible by an attitude of slumber.